



The Old, Worm-eaten "Gate-leg" Table. "No doubt the worms are eating away at it right now."

Touching Upon Aunts and Antiques

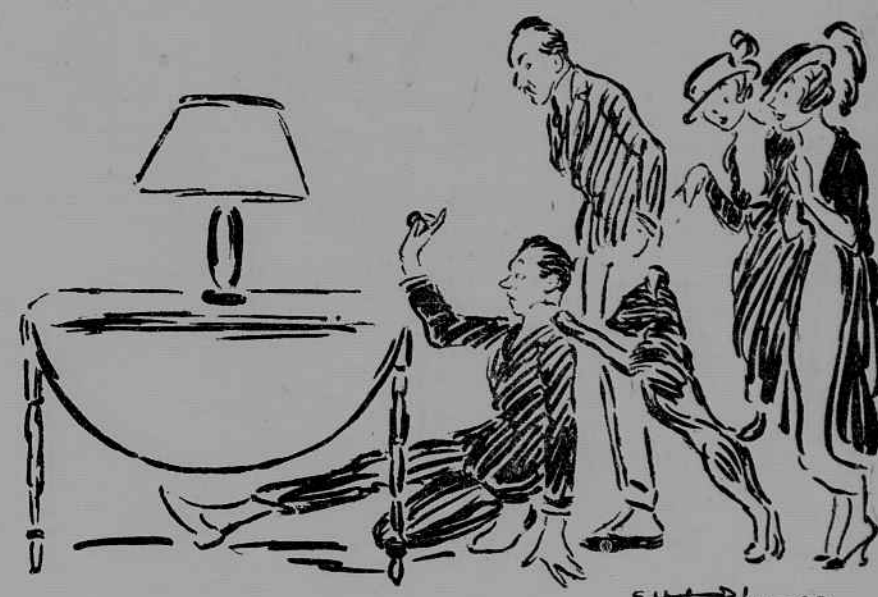
Being a light joust at those who practise both impractically.

By Ralph Block

Incidental Sketches by Ethel Plummer



The Refectory Table. Talking to the lady at the other end



The Little Stone Bought from a Senussi at Tunis. "If you get down here under the table and hold it to the light you'll see a slight blur."

RELATIVES are always difficult, but among relatives aunts are probably more difficult than any other species. Uncles are fairish in their way—the very process of being an uncle seems to supply any man with a shade of more than human understanding and indulgence—and cousins are usually too far out of the orbit swimming around in their own circles to have any chance to be troubling. But aunts, it must be confessed, have an invasive quality—if a term can be made up for the occasion—that is always sending them up out of their own territory, even when they don't mean to invade.

I haven't any aunts, but I know a lot of people who have, and it must be confessed that I spend a lot of time saving people from their own aunts. In fact, if I may modestly say so, I've become rather good at it, and it's got now where it's no unusual thing to be called upon once or twice a week to extricate a chap from his aunt. I don't mind confessing it takes a little finesse, a bit of subtlety; an aunt now and then is no ordinary tax on a man's abilities. But with practice and intelligence and hardihood you can get used to anything, and I've managed to make it much easier by developing a kind of technique in the matter. I don't go in much for card catalogues and the like, but, just as a matter of record, I've never failed once flatly with an aunt, and most of the time I've done rather more than ordinarily well. There's just once that I came near to putting a dent into my record, and I never think of it now without shuddering a little bit. It was such a narrow escape!

Ralston Dalhousie—he's one of the Yonkers Dalhousies—came in to see me the other day, and I didn't have to look at him twice—intuition's such a wonderful thing—to know there was something up with him. Ralston has reddish hair; in fact, it's red, and he's always been very careful about his colors whenever he came to see me because I'm frightfully sensitive to colors. But this time he had on a pea-green scarf with a bit of blue hairline showing through his waistcoat, and it didn't need a second look on my part to see he must have been terribly upset to come in at me that way. He grabbed a cigarette from the table and lit it with a hand that visibly shook and walked around my chambers two or three times with me looking on before he could get it out.

Finally Ralston came to it. "It's my aunt," he said, and there was something I'd never heard before in Ralston's voice. It was pretty close to terror. "My Aunt Aurelia," he went on, and stuck there,

choked up by some emotion, I couldn't, with all my intuitive penetration, quite fathom.

"Buck up, Ralston," I said; "there's an Aunt Aurelia in every family somewhere sooner or later, and you've no call to be unduly excited about yours."

"No, Orval," he said, "you don't understand. I'm willing to stand up and take my aunts like a man, but Aunt Aurelia is different—a kind of super-aunt. I've known you, Orval, for a long time, and I hope you won't mind my telling you that I've been adapting some of your methods to Aunt Aurelia, not without success, but, frankly, I'm up against it, and I can't go along now without your help."

I could see he was tremendously in earnest about it. His voice shook and there were dark lines under his eyes, probably from sleeplessness. I couldn't do any more than silently give him my hand in a pledge of faithful protection. It must have reassured him. He drew a deep breath, said "Thanks, old man," and sat down in front of the fire.

"Aunt Aurelia," said Ralston, "lives on 'movements.' There's no way of telling what her next 'movement's' going to be. Nothing to go on except that she changes often, and you can pretty well bank on it that after a month or so of one movement she'll shift soon to another. She's fairly diverse about it, and that's one of the things that makes it difficult. Why, I can remember when I was a youngster hearing Dad say Aunt Aurelia couldn't come to Grandmother Dalhousie's funeral because she was shifting from Egyptian scarabs to Belgian hares, and Grandmother Dalhousie died between shifts."

Ralston stopped and looked reminiscently into the fire. "The only time Aunt Aurelia corresponded to every one else was during the war, and I think she had to then because there wasn't a chance to do anything else. She went into the war long before the President did, but by the time we declared in on it the tide was too strong for Aunt Aurelia to quit, strong as she is, and she had to keep coming along. I rather expected that Aunt Aurelia would go in for reconstruction, and I'd been preparing for it out in the trenches, but that's where I missed out. Aunt Aurelia signed the peace agreement while Foch was still considering the armistice, and when I came back last month I found Aunt Aurelia up to her shoulders in a brand-new 'movement.'"

"What?" I asked of Ralston.

"She's going in strong for antiques, and I don't know whether it's reaction from the austerity of war movements or

plain enthusiasm, but Aunt Aurelia is more excited over antiques than I've ever seen her before. Why, maybe you won't believe it"—and he got up in his emotion and came walking over to me—"but she's hired a six story loft downtown on Sixth Avenue and has got it almost filled up with wormy furniture, and she's negotiating now for another lease over on Ninth Avenue—'near the docks,' she puts it—so it will be easier to receive incoming cargoes of aged chairs.

"I don't mind her spending the better part of her fortune on it, though I must say"—looking at me a little nervously—"it would put a terrible crimp into me to have Aunt Aurelia leave a lot of dirty Chippendale behind her in place of a healthy bank account. But even that

isn't so bad if Aunt Aurelia would only leave me out of it. She's got me snooping around with her in musty old places on Lexington Avenue and down on the East Side till I hardly sleep nights any more. What's more, Aunt Aurelia expects me to learn all this pedigreed stuff. I don't believe there's a house in Connecticut we haven't been through from garret to cellar in the last four weeks, and most of my mornings I have to spend over at the Metropolitan Museum consulting experts. If you knew Aunt Aurelia you'd understand what this means to me. I've been barely existing this week in the hope that she'd wear out on antiques and go in for stamp collecting, of which I've seen signs, but so far she doesn't give any hope of letting up.

"And I can't stand it, Orval! I can't stand it. What with Tanagra and Chinese Chippendale and Wedgwood and Ming and Adam and toby jugs and highboys and chairs you can't sit in, I'd rather be back in the trenches any day," and, somewhat to my discomfort, Ralston's shoulders heaved and he put his handkerchief to his eyes.

I saw that this was a case that needed swift action. It has been one of my axioms always to act swiftly, to hesitate at nothing, and frequently the wildest and most impossible scheme in dealing with aunts is the most successful. I hunted deeply and fiercely for something splendid and dashing, something that would, so to speak, seize Ralston and his Aunt Aurelia from the mad torrent of antiquity that was bearing them to the precipice of destruction.

"We passed another loft with a 'For Rent' sign on the way downtown this

morning," began Ralston again, but I silenced him with a wave of the hand. I wanted to think. I did, and then suddenly it came to me.

"Can I meet Aunt Aurelia?" I asked Ralston. "I want to meet her at the Sixth Avenue loft, and I want to meet her to-morrow."

It needed speed. Ralston was too desperate for comfort.

"Will 11 o'clock do?" said Ralston, and we agreed on 11.

"I'm an expert," I told him. "What I don't know about antiques was never understood by the human race. Tiffany's and Duveen and Christies never buy anything without my advice, and it's only as an unusual favor to you that I take time out of my heavy schedule to come over and look over your wares. Meet me at

11, Ralston, and don't forget to lay it on thick."

He gave me the address and departed. I never knew a man's back to speak so loudly of gratitude.

I made up with special care the next morning. I've had to look after my wardrobe rather sharply since my little penchant for aunts has become known, and now I'm qualified to step into almost any situation at a moment's notice. That day I wore checked trousers, a fancy waistcoat, gladstone collar and red scarf and a gray coat buttoned up rather tight and close to the chin, made in the style of the '80s. I grayed my temples a bit, carried a heavy silver-rimmed pince-nez and put on a gray bowler. It was a bit neat, at that. You can imagine Ralston when my car put me down at his grimy-looking loft at 11 o'clock.

"Splendid, splendid, Orval!" he chanted, and I could see hope lighting up in his weary eyes. "She's inside, in the office."

She was. Among a good many aunts Aunt Aurelia was the most distinguished and determined looking I have ever seen. She almost matched my costume with her own. She had on lots of black jet, glimmering from between the folds of a rich Paisley shawl, and a tiny poke bonnet on top of the deadliest pair of female eyes I've ever seen. I confess I wasn't altogether assured when I met her. Fortunately, my intuition set me on the right track at once.

"My aunt, Mrs. Dalhousie," said Ralston in his most velvet tones. But I didn't wait for her answer.

"Your shawl, Mrs. Dalhousie," I said, grabbing it and feeling of the fine rich stuff with an expert gesture. "Why don't you rich people take expert advice? I can match these any day in a little factory on Warren Street that turns them out at \$17.50 apiece wholesale. And I'll warrant you paid all of \$150 for this."

It was a good start, I must admit. She'd paid \$200 for the shawl, and there wasn't a word left in her. I don't think she said ten words from the sixth floor of that loft back to the basement, but what we did to that rare assortment of rare antique goods cannot be told—it has to be imagined. I took out a little case of emergency surgical instruments I had picked up on the way down and sawed and hacked and bored away at her furniture until there wasn't a piece that hadn't been hurled down from its high eminence. With a little bottle of

acid I showed her just how worm holes were made and then colored. I went back to a classic diction that I hadn't thought of in years and some of the Greek verbs that I used as nouns will probably be waiting for me accusingly on the other side of the Styx when I go across. As a matter of fact, Aunt Aurelia had the choicest collection of good stuff that, even my inexperienced eyes had been fortunate enough to observe. But between what her pieces really were and what I said they were lay a vast and cloudy gulf.

We had come up the spidery stairway from the basement, with most of my dialogue exhausted. It was a little uncomfortable, the silence, and I wasn't at all sure we were over the river. Aunt Aurelia's eyes worried me. She seemed to be in deep thought. Suddenly she turned to Ralston.

"Advertise the lot at auction to-morrow, Ralston," she said, and there was the most touching misery in her voice. It almost made me ashamed. "And put both of the buildings back with the agents. I'm done. Goodbye, Mr. Desperer." (I had thought it best to take a new name for the purpose), and she was off to her car, with Ralston delightedly after her.

A few days later Ralston came around to see me. There was something uncertain in his manner, a little trepidation that made me suspicious.

After some conversational sparring he came out with it.

"Aunt Aurelia sends a message to you. She said to tell you in these words: 'I may be an old fool, but it's a poor fool that doesn't know another!' And Ralston grinned a little sheepishly. Suddenly I understood.

"She knew?" I queried, and Ralston nodded slowly.

"All the way back she made fun of you and said you needn't have taken so much trouble about it. She'd have liked it better if you'd come out frankly and told her what you thought of her."

I confess it was a jolt. Yet when I looked at Ralston, smiling and carefree, I had to admit at least I hadn't failed, even at some personal expense of vanity. You can't entirely choose your methods when you're dealing with aunts. "She sails for Antwerp Thursday," said Ralston. "She's decided reconstruction may be better suited to the time after all," and he sighed with relief.

As for myself, I've been taking a rest. I haven't seen anything that resembled an aunt for six months.

The Returning—Lines in Commemoration of James Russell Lowell

By Percy MacKaye

Written for the centennial of his birth, and read by the author, February 22, 1919, in Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, where Lowell first read his ode commemorating the soldiers of the Civil War, July 21, 1865.

I
"Weak-winged is song," he said:
Weak to adventure that "clear-ethered height"
Where memory stars the shining dead
Who stilled their hearts to right
Our human wrong;
Yet his own words were strong
To rise on wings beyond his time and place,
And hallow those dead heroes with the grace
Of after-living song.
Enlarging this hall
Of Harvard men to be a shrine for all
Who reverence the valor of our race.

So also one
At Gettysburg recalled what the great dead had done:

"The world," said he, "will little note
What we say here."
And still the simple words he said so clear
Abide with those deeds, to be
For both a mingled immortality.

II
But whether in song or action
The dumb life leaves no seed;
Within all outward deed
The Word of God is fate;
And only the soul articulate
Survives, to breed
New vital sons of God
Where still, above the turned-down sod,
The lyric scholar lives beyond his letters,
The patriot above his faction,
The freeman through all fetters.

III
So he survives—Lowell, our patriot,

Freeman and lyric scholar: not
Because his name, of honored line,
Is graven golden on another age
Among recorded lives
On hoarded scripts, in hushed archives
Of academe and nation;
Not in dull homage to a shrine
Of bookworm-cult or worldly heritage
We give to-day his birth commemoration:
But because his spirit wrought
Its image on surviving thought,
An image, cast from its clay mould,
To rise in clean, unguisting gold:
The mind, whose many-darting prism
Resolves in reason's lucid white;
The heart, wherein no hidden schism
Warps sense of beauty from the sense of right,
But where—in one clear-burning, human light—
Are welded poetry and patriotism.
So Lowell, outlasting the years,
Stands forth—no sanctum statue, but a man
Whom all his human peers
Honor as artist and American.

V
The fleeting lines forbid
To follow, year by ripening year,
The stately footsteps of that sure career,
Where on the singer fell the statesman's cloak,
And where the scholar-artist stood amid
His peers of Europe, and bespoke
Our country's character.
In London and Madrid
The tokens of his missions still aver
His rich felicity, and still
In Cambridge, between Shady Hill
And Elmwood, the remembering air
Is fragrant of our Friend of Learning there.

VI
But more than all endeared to memory
Of varied life and long,
His most enduring substance is a song—

Itself an ode and elegy
Commemorating the inspired dead
Who—even as he—
Survive their dark interment; and for us,
Inseparable from all he wrought or said,
Still rise illustrious
The words he spoke of those who, gone before,
Came living homeward from heroic war.

VII
And now again they come;
Again, in proud mortality,
Homeward once more
They march with unvanquishing Victory
And muted drum
Rolling the pageant of a vaster stage—
The heroes of our age:
Our country's soul perennial!

And now once more, O now—
In that "clear-ethered" hall
Of Memory and of Exhortation seated,
How those great words with which he greeted
Our fathers still resound, and how
It stirs us to surmise
The exultation in his eyes,
And from his lips the lyric reverence,
As he might now greet these—
These men who bore America overseas:
Armies, that were the righteous eloquence
Of peace; soul-swords, oracular of truth;
Battalions that were ballads of wild youth;
Dun khaki boys, who sowed the mud fields pied
With blue and white and red of flowering pride
Rooted in justice: Those, returning now—
The live, and living dead—are they who left
The dreams of their civilian years,
Their work at loom and desk and plough,
Self-choosers, through their chosen peers,
To yoke themselves to help set Freedom free—
Conscripts of Conscience, Duty's grenadiers:
Young New World Jaxons, banded overseas
With allied hearts sore wearied out,

Whose van at Château-Thierry cleft
The Prussian Dragon through his iron snout,
Wrestling the Golden Fleece of Liberty
To clothe the world's bereft.

VIII
What patriot pride—
Not counterfeited by the noisy clan
Who toss at coins to make the Eagle scream,
But that unravished dream
And love of country which is faith in Man—
Lowell might feel, a prophet justified,
To hail these men, and the victorious
Vow they redeemed for us:
Renouncing neutral will,
To know one faith—and live it,
To share one life—and give it:
That choice they made and kept, 'tis ours to fulfill!

IX
Yet how fulfil the test?—
"He is a slave, who dares not be
In the right with two or three,"
'Twas Lowell said; and they who know the zest,
Of battling, single-handed, for the best
The multitudes disdain,
Facing their whips to earn them their own gain,
Will sanction that brave wisdom. Yes;
But O, the large delight,
The majesty of gladness, and excess
Of Splendor, when the multitudes are right!
Then, then—with all one's spirit bended tense
To lean against the tide for liberty—
Sudden the awful tide itself, immense,
Lunar with mystic life-birth, turns to sea:
Then—as a swimmer, caught from undertow,
Who yields, all free,
His body to the goalward billow, so
The one-will yields its atom, in the shoal
Of multitudinous life-will, toward the goal
Of tidal Freedom. There,
In strange mid-sea,
Between the darting northern lights of death

And the living rim of sunrise, half aware—
Up from eternity—
He feels the spirit breath
Of the lost, the ever-sought, the risen Atlantis,
Island of Aspiration,
Whose beauty's fragrance, like a fronded plant, is
Vocal with manifold, blended murmurings:
Isle of the Lost—where souls of tribe and nation
Commingle lose themselves, and losing, so
Find one another
By the secret springs
Of common yearning, and in one heart-glow
Embrace—brother with brother.

X
By some such deep-sea sense
And vision—dimly seen—of beauty's permanence:
In fellowship, born of death's nearness,
In friendship of a mutual will,
We all have felt the common dearness
Of her we call Our Country deeply instil
Our concept of mankind. The least of these
Who comes with Glory home across the seas
Has felt the deep communion. O, let all
Hold fast that communal
Faith, and let not the niggling partisan
Obscure the patriot's larger love of man,
Or seek the cure of war in sectional cant.
The statesman-singer we commemorate
Was militant
For song that served the stars beyond the state.
The stars still beckon from the blue beyond:
The bleeding stripes beneath are borne
On arms of valor, that has torn
The tyrant from his seat, and struck his bond
Of terror from the world. And now the world,
that waits
Our ministration, hails in dawning wonder
The orbit of a galaxy of states,
For what the stars have joined earth shall not put
asunder.